

WFO Southern Sierra Field Trip (7-13 July 2011)
With Jon Dunn and Kimball Garrett as leaders and with assistance from Lena Hayashi

Our southern Sierra trip began in Kernville, California with a social get together on the afternoon of 7 July. We were joined by WFO's scholarship winner, Raymond Van Buskirk, who proved to be an invaluable help in finding birds and in showing them to others (and always done with a smile). Sadly, Bob Barnes, who was to be a third leader, developed a serious virus and was unable to assist us. We are pleased to report that he fully recovered in about a month's time.

On our first day (8 July) we investigated the north fork of the Kern River and the Western Divide, starting in Kernville and going as far north as Quaking Aspen in Tulare County. At lower elevations in the chaparral we found a Costa's Hummingbird (on a nest), an uncommon species in Tulare County. Slightly higher up in the black oaks we had Cassin's and Hutton's Vireos, Black-throated Gray and Nashville Warblers (*ridgwayi* subspecies) and Purple Finch (*californicus* subspecies). With the latter two we discussed their appearance and particularly their vocalizations with their respective eastern subspecies. We saw and listened to White-breasted Nuthatches giving their high pitched *wier* notes, characteristic of the coastal *aculeata* group of subspecies. Farther up we walked the Trail of the Giants, a majestic grove of giant sequoias. There we eventually located several Hammond's Flycatchers, a rather local species, especially here at the southern end of the breeding range. Nearby we had Dusky Flycatchers which differ vocally and slightly in appearance. We also had superb views of several Golden-crowned Kinglets. At our highest elevation at Quaking Aspen we found numerous Lincoln's Sparrows and heard several Warbling Vireos. Yellow, Yellow-rumped ("Audubon's"), MacGillivray's, and Wilson's Warblers were all present and Fox Sparrows from the "Thick-billed" subspecies group were particularly numerous, and we heard them give their *chink* call notes, very similar to the call notes of California Towhee and completely unlike the contact notes from the three other subspecies groups.

The next morning (9 July) we birded the famous South Fork of the Kern River. At the preserve we spent considerable amount of time watching the federally endangered *extimus* "Southwest" Willow Flycatcher and discussed their slight plumage and possibly vocal differences from the much more numerous and more northerly breeding subspecies, *brewsteri* (the widespread migrant over much of the West). A pair of Summer Tanagers was extremely cooperative and we eventually found nine Lawrence's Goldfinches. Some 50 Tricolored Blackbirds and three Greater Roadrunners were found nearby. Notable for the day was the chance to compare multiple Ladder-backed and Nuttall's Woodpeckers, the later species being more restricted to the riparian habitat while the former was largely confined in this region to the Joshua tree woodland.

The next day (10 July) we retraced our steps from two days earlier up the north fork of the Kern River, but then headed east and up over Sherman Pass to the Kern Plateau. We started with chaparral birding and birds were everywhere from this recovering burn area. Notable were California Thrashers (very local in Tulare County) and Wrentits along with

a few Black-chinned Sparrows. A Sage Sparrow (no doubt *canescens*) was likely a post breeding dispersant from points east. A singing second calendar year male Indigo Bunting was certainly a surprise. Several Lazuli Buntings were also present. In the high mountain meadows surrounded by red fir just west of Sherman Pass we saw and heard several Hermit Thrushes and at Sherman Pass we had a stunning male Williamson's Sapsucker. We continued on to Troy Meadows and saw Spotted Sandpipers and had excellent views of territorial *oriantha* White-crowned Sparrows. Quite distinct - from *gambelii*- the widespread western wintering subspecies - this subspecies winters mainly in western Mexico. On the return we birded Bald Mountain. Here we had several White-breasted Nuthatches of the interior *tenuissima* subspecies. Although virtually identical in appearance to *aculeata* that we had seen two days earlier just to the west, their chattering calls are completely different. Some five White-throated Swifts were notable as was a single Indra Swallowtail, a scarce and local butterfly species of our mountains. Through the course of the day we recorded a dozen southbound Rufous Hummingbirds, including a number of adult males.

After checking out of our motel in Kernville the morning of 11 July we headed east over Walker Pass and north up US 395 to Nine Mile Canyon. In the Joshua tree stands we found Cactus Wrens and Scott's Orioles and on the slope also had family groups of the introduced Chukar. At Chimney Creek Campground we found Gray Flycatcher and a pair (with nest) of Plumbeous Vireos, one of the few known locations in the Sierra for this species. We also had both *aculeata* and a single *tenuissima* White-breasted Nuthatches. This is the only known location we have recorded both subspecies during the breeding season. Probably the group highlight though was the pair of Mountain Quail with newly fledged young that remained stationary for extended studies from the vehicle. A couple of Grappletails along the small creek here was an odonate highlight for the trip. We headed back down Nine Mile Canyon and visited Louise Knecht's home near Inyokern. Here we easily located some dozen Le Conte's Thrashers, some of which were almost being hand fed. Later to the east at Coso Community College in Ridgecrest we had a family group of Long-eared Owls with a single Barn Owl perched nearby. After lunch we then headed north to Bishop. At least two parties saw a Prairie Falcon in the southern Owens Valley on the way north. Near dusk we birded late in the day north of Bishop where we saw both Common and Lesser Nighthawks.

The next morning (12 July) we started at Baker Meadow just to the west of Big Pine. Here we heard two Yellow-breasted Chats and saw two more male Indigo Buntings along with two Blue Grosbeaks. Later we headed up into the White Mountains where we encountered more Chukars at Tollhouse Spring. In the pinyon-juniper belt at about 8000' we located some nine Juniper Titmice. We also found Pinyon Jays along with a pair of Hairy Woodpeckers and a Blue-gray Gnatcatcher here. The Bushtits were of the interior *plumbeus* subspecies which has a bluish-gray rather than brownish crown. These give lower pitched and sharper call notes that are delivered at a slower rate than the coastal subspecies. We ventured as high as the Schulman bristlecone pine grove where highlights included a calling Gray Flycatcher, a Green-tailed Towhee and a Cassin's Finch on a nest. Later in the afternoon we ventured up the east side of the Sierra again west of Bishop where we had good views of a number of Gray-crowned Rosy-Finches (*dawsoni*

subspecies) in Aspendell. Back in Bishop, after a final group dinner at Whiskey Creek, we reviewed (with slides) many of the species we had seen. Our emphasis was on the geographical differentiation of many western species and the influence of the Sierra Nevada on speciation.

On our final day (13 July) we started shortly after dawn at Minaret Vista picnic area, on the Mono/Madera County line at the crest of the high Sierra above Mammoth. Our main goal was seeing Pine Grosbeak and we found four birds. These Pine Grosbeaks are of the *californica* subspecies, endemic to the Sierra Nevada, which is small billed and apparently has distinctly different vocalizations. It is unknown away from the Sierra, even as a vagrant. Interestingly it is almost unknown during the winter season (see Gaines, Birds of the Yosemite Sierra), even though they must surely be there, somewhere. The one extralimital vagrant from southern California at an oasis in Kern County in early November was likely of larger billed *montana* from the Rocky Mountains. Other birds of note included an adult Peregrine Falcon (obligingly perched on a dead conifer for extended studies), two Band-tailed Pigeons, two Williamson's Sapsuckers, an Olive-sided Flycatcher, five Clark's Nutcrackers, Mountain Bluebirds, numerous Cassin's Finches, and a single Evening Grosbeak. Later just below Mammoth in the sage habitat of the Great Basin we found Sage Thrashers and Brewer's Sparrows, and, best of all, three Greater Sage-Grouse.

We want to give a special thank you to Lena Hayashi who volunteered her time to handle many logistical issues and to keep us well watered and fed.

Stay tuned for another WFO tour in the early summer of 2013 to the northern Sierra and northeastern California. It is to be led by Jon Dunn, Dave Quady and Ken Able with assistance again from Lena Hayashi. Stay tuned on the WFO website for details of this excursion which we intend to be a research tour. This region overall has not been extensively birded.